

Soviet Document Suggests Mahmoud Abbas Was a K.G.B. Spy in the 1980s

By Peter Baker

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JERUSALEM — Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia may have more in common than an interest in Middle East peace talks. According to a newly discovered Soviet document, Mr. Abbas may have once worked for the K.G.B., too.

The possibility, trumpeted by the Israeli media on Wednesday night and just as quickly dismissed by Palestinian officials, emerged from a document in a British archive listing Soviet agents from 1983. A reference to Mr. Abbas is tantalizing but cryptic, just two lines identifying him by the code name “Mole.” At the end of his entry are two words: “K.G.B. agent.”

The suggestion that Mr. Abbas may have been on Moscow’s roster more than three decades ago might have been just a historical curiosity but for the fact that it comes at the same time that Mr. Putin has been trying to organize new talks between Mr. Abbas and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. A Russian envoy was in Jerusalem this week to meet with Mr. Netanyahu, but the Israeli and Palestinian leaders remain at odds and no direct talks appear imminent.

“We thought it was important now in the context of the Russian attempt to arrange a summit between Abbas and Netanyahu, particularly because of Abbas’s joint K.G.B. past with Putin,” said Gideon Remez, one of two researchers at the Truman Institute at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who found and disclosed the Soviet document to Israel’s Channel 1. (At the end of the Soviet era, Mr. Putin was a K.G.B. lieutenant colonel.)

Mr. Remez’ research partner, Isabella Ginor, said Mr. Abbas’s past was relevant because of Russia’s possible continuing influence on him. “We don’t know what happened later on and if Abu Mazen went on with his service or work for the Soviets,” she said, using another name for Mr. Abbas. “But now that he is head of the Palestinian Authority, this can be a lever on him.”

Palestinian officials scoffed at the report of Mr. Abbas’s possible ties to the Soviet spy agency, calling it a brazen effort to undermine him at a time when he is struggling with dissent at home and seeking support abroad. Gal Berger of Israel Radio said Palestinian officials laughed at the report.

“There’s a clear trend of attempting to damage Abu Mazen by various elements, including Israel,” Mohammed al-Madani, a central committee member of Mr. Abbas’s Fatah party, told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. “This is another attempt to slander him.”

Indeed, Palestinian officials argued that there would have been no need for Mr. Abbas to be a Soviet agent because the Palestine Liberation Organization at the time was openly working with Moscow. Mr. Abbas, they said, led a Palestinian-Soviet friendship foundation, making him the de facto liaison to Moscow.

The document naming Mr. Abbas was among thousands of pages of files spirited out of Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union and turned over to British intelligence by a former K.G.B. archivist, Vasily Mitrokhin. Disillusioned by Soviet repression, Mr. Mitrokhin spent years painstakingly copying secret documents by hand, creating a treasure trove for Western analysts and historians that became known as the Mitrokhin archive.

The documents, the subject of at least two books, are now stored at the Churchill Archives Center at the University of Cambridge and were opened to the public two years ago. Mr. Remez and Ms. Ginor said they came across the paper naming Mr. Abbas while researching Soviet involvement in the Middle East.

Under a title listing people cultivated by the K.G.B. in 1983, the document names “Abbas, Mahmoud,” born 1935 in Palestine, as an agent in Damascus. It calls him “Krotov,” a variant of the word mole. Mr. Abbas was indeed born in 1935 in what was then known as Palestine, but after the creation of the State of Israel, in 1948, his family fled to Damascus, Syria, where he was raised and educated.

Yet the document is as notable for what it does not say. It says nothing, for instance, about how or when Mr. Abbas was recruited, what he did for the K.G.B., whether he was paid or how long he remained an agent.

But Mr. Remez and Ms. Ginor noted that Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian deputy foreign minister who has been shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in recent days, was stationed in Damascus around that time. Mr. Bogdanov’s official Foreign Ministry biography says he served in Damascus from 1983-89 and again from 1991-94.

“We can’t say he was directly connected with Abbas at the time but we assume at least over time he learned about it because he is a Middle East expert,” Mr. Remez said.

Mr. Remez said that they were not trying to undercut Mr. Abbas and, in fact, they favor talks with the Palestinians — but not under the auspices of the Russians, who should not be trusted. “It is not basically a good idea,” he said. “So that is why we thought this is the time to go public with this discovery.”